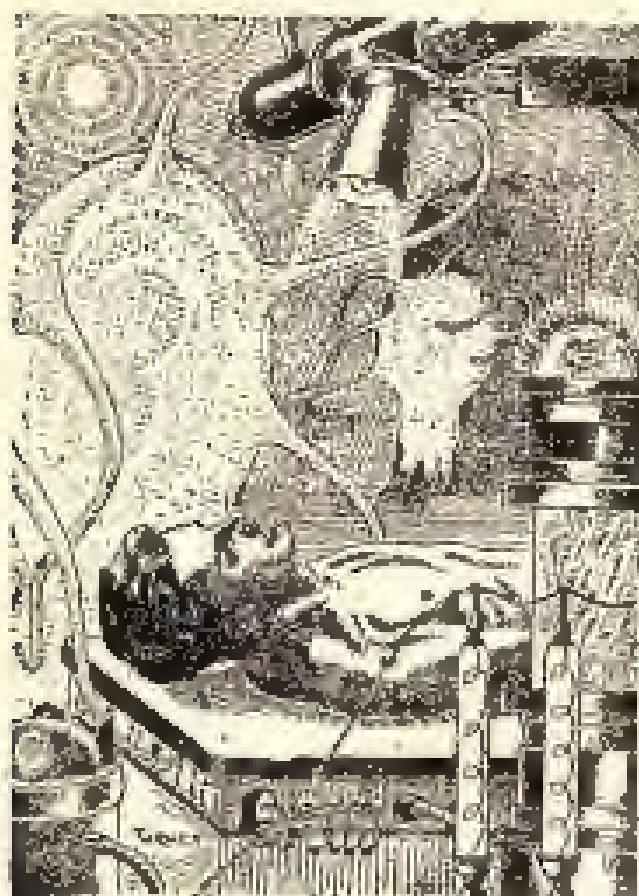


*To The Visitor From Earth, That Remote Sphere Seemed Utterly
Weird And Terrible . . . Until He Knew It With Unearthly Senses*



ESCAPE TO MLOK

By

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CHAPTER I

THE RUCKUS ON THE MOUNTAIN

IT WAS on Spanish Mountain, where he had climbed from Donner to escape the society of his fellow campers, that Lennel Sarkis first met the people of the planet Mlok. Since he was far from being an expert mountaineer, he had not cared to assail the crowning peaks of the long, sombre ridge, but had contented himself with the lower, more accessible eastern terminus. From this, he could look down on the waters of Frog Lake, lying dark and still at the bottom of a bare declivity.

Among volcanic-looking boulders, well out of the wind that swept the upper ridge, he seated himself in morose contemplation; while the mountain shadows lengthened, shaken out like lazy wings, and a pale light crept eastward on the black waters below. The vastness of the solitude, its grim and craggy grandeur, began to have a soothing effect upon Sarkis; and the human trivialities and banalities that

had driven him to flight assumed their proper insignificance in the mighty perspectives on which he peered.

He had seen no one, not even a shepherd or fisherman, in his climb through the forested ravines and up the sunflower-covered slopes. And he was startled as well as annoyed when a pebble, loosed as if by some unheard footfall, clattered past him and went over the precipice. Someone else had climbed the mountain; and his misanthropic aversion rose in a gall-like bitterness, as he turned to survey the intruder.

Instead of the tourist or mountaineer he had expected, he saw two beings who bore not even the remotest appearance to humankind, and, moreover, were obviously unrelated to any species of Earth-life. Not only for that first startled moment, but during the entire episode that followed, Sarkis wondered if he had fallen asleep and been visited by some preposterous dream.

Each of the beings was about four feet high, with a somewhat doubtful division

into head and body. Their formation was incredibly flat and two-dimensional; and they seemed to float rather than stand, as if swimming through the air. The upper division, which one accustomed to earthly physical structures would have taken for the head, was much larger than the lower, and more rotund. It resembled the featureless disk of a moon-fish, and was fringed with numberless interbranching tendrils or feelers, like a floral arabesque. The lower division suggested a Chinese kite. It was marked with unknown goblin features, some of which may have been eyes, of a peculiarly elongated and oblique sort. It ended in three broad, streamer-like members, sub-dividing into webby tassels that trailed on the ground but seemed wholly inadequate for the purpose of legs.

The coloration of these beings baffled Sarkis. He received alternate impressions of opal-streak blackness, dusky greyiness and blood-bright violet. Impossible beyond belief, they hung before him among the cricks, swaying forward with a dreamy slowness, as if attached to the ground by their tasselled streamers. Their fringes of woven tendrils seemed to float towards him, quivering with restless life, and certain of their eye-like features gradually lightened and drew his gaze with the hypnotic gleaming of crystals.

The feeling of divorce from reality increased upon him; for now he seemed to hear a low, insistent humming, to which he could assign no definite source. It corresponded vaguely with the slow vibration of the fringes, in its beat and cadence. He heard it all around him in the air, like a mesh of sound; and yet, somehow, it was inside his own brain, as if the unmyriad cells were thrilling with a telepathic murmur from a hundred worlds unknown to man.

The humming grew louder; it took on a partial coherence and articulation, as if certain sounds were repeated over and over again, in a long-drawn sequence. Still more articulate it grew, seeming to form a prolonged vocable. Startlingly, it dawned upon him that the vocable was intended for the phrase, "Come with us," and he realised that the beings were trying earnestly to convey an invitation, by means of vocally vocal organs.

Clark Ashton Smith's wonderful imagination knows no bounds in its conception of worlds unknown, where completely alien conditions would mystify and, perhaps, horrify any human venturer into them. But just as we can hardly expect intelligent life to have evolved in human shape amid unearthly surroundings, so we cannot expect it to be handicapped by possessing senses similar to ours. Indeed, it is more likely that things which to our eyes would seem ugly and menacing would be beautiful and attractive to the natives of such a different planet.

LIKE one who has been mesmerised, without fear or wonder, he gave himself up to the impressions that besieged his senses. On the flat, vacant, moon-fish disks, very gradually, dim, intricate lines and masses limned themselves, growing brighter and more distinct, until they began to suggest an actual picture.

Sarkis could comprehend little of what he saw, but he received an idea of immense distance and alien, distorted perspective. In a blaze of exotic light, a sea-like flood of intense colour, strange-angled machineries towered, and structures that might have been either buildings or vegetable growths receded on a ground of baffling dimension and doubtful inclination. Through this hazy scene there floated forms that bore a slight and incoherent resemblance to the beings who confronted him; a resemblance like the broken hint of natural shapes maintained in the utmost perversions of cubism. Together with these forms, as if conveyed by them, there moved another figure having an equally remote and dubious likeness to a human being.

Somehow, Sarkis divined that this latter figure was intended for himself. The scene was a picture of some foreign world or dimension, which these fantastic creatures invited him to visit. Ahke in all its details, the tableau was duplicated on the disks.

With curious lucidity and coherence, he

pondered the invitation. Should he accept it? And if he did accept, what would happen? Of course, it was all a dream, and dreams were tricky things, with a habit of vanishing if one tried consciously to fathom their elusive vistas. But, supposing it were not a dream? From what world, then, had these beings emerged, and by what mode of transit were they enabled to visit the Earth? Surely, they could not have come from any planet of the Solar System; their utter strangeness seemed to argue that they were children of another galaxy, or at least of another sun than ours.

The beings appeared to perceive his hesitation. The pictures on their bodies faded, and were slowly replaced by others, as if they sought to woo him with the varied scenes of their native world. At the same time, the humming noise was resumed; and after awhile, the equivocal murmur began to suggest familiar words, most of which continued to elude Sarkis. He seemed to make out an eerie prolongation of "offer" and "escape," as if these vocables were uttered by some enormous, droning insect.

Then, through the strange, hypnotic sound, he heard the crisp laughter of a girl and the gay cluster of human voices. Plainly, several people had climbed the mountain and were coming towards him along the slope, though he could not see them as yet. The dreamy charm was broken; and he felt a shock of actual fear, as well as a deep startlement, when he saw that the unknown visitors were still before him. These intruding human voices had convinced him that this happening was no dream, and he felt the involuntary recall of the Earth-born mind from things that are monstrous and inexplicable.

The voices drew nearer behind the rocks, and he thought that he recognised the tones of one or more of his fellow campers. Then, as he continued to face the apparitions, he discerned above their grotesquely floating forms the sudden flash of sourceless, glinting metals that hung in the air, like some mechanical mirage. A mass of slanting rods and curving reticulations seemed to lower and descend about the two beings. An instant later, it was gone, and the visitants had also disappeared!

Sarkis hardly saw the approach of a

woman and two men, members of the party he had wished to avoid. To a bewilderment like that of some rudely awakened sleeper was added the eerie consternation of one who thinks that he has met the supernatural.

A WEEK later, Sarkis had returned to his lodgings in San Francisco, and had resumed the tedious commercial art which formed his one reliable means of livelihood. This unemotional work had involved the ruthless smothering of higher ambitions. He had wanted to paint imaginative pictures that dreamed of living in opulent colour a fantasy such as Beardsley had caught in sinuous line. But such pictures, it seemed, were no small request.

The peculiar happening on Spanish Mountain had stirred his imagination profoundly, though he was still doubtful of its actuality. He gave himself to endless speculations, and often he cursed the untimely interruption that had caused the weird visitants to vanish. It seemed to him that the beings—if they were not mere hallucinatory images—had appeared in answer to his own vague and undirected longings for the super-mundane. Like envoys from a foreign universe, they had sought him out, and favoured him with their invitation. Their attempt at verbal communication argued a knowledge of English; and it was plain that they could come and go at will, no doubt by means of some occult mechanism.

What did they want with him? he wondered. What would have been his fate if he had accompanied them? His pictorial bent for the fantastic was deeply stimulated; and more than once, after his daily stint of advertising art was done, he tried to paint the visitants from memory. This he found peculiarly difficult: the images with which he sought to deal were without analogy, and their very hues and proportions baffled his recollection. It was as if an alien spectrum, a trans-Euclidean geometry, had somehow been involved.

One evening, he stood glowering with dissatisfaction before his easel. The picture, he thought, was a silly muddle of over-printed colours which utterly failed to convey the true awfulness of its theme. There was no sound or other warning, nothing that could consciously

attract his attention. But, turning abruptly, he saw behind him the two beings he had met on Spanish Mountain. They awayed slowly in the lamplight, between the cluttered table and a somewhat slightly divan, trailing their tasselled members on an old rug whose faded floral designs were splashed with fresh paint.

With the loaded brush in his fingers, Sarkis could only stand and stare, held in the same hypnotic thrall that had swept him beyond fear or wonder on the mountain. Once more he beheld the gradual, soundless waving of the arabesque feelers; again he heard the dreamy, monotonous hum that resolved itself into long-drawn vowels, inviting him to go with the visitants, and again, on the moon-fish disks, were depicted scenes that would have been the despair of a futurist.

Almost without emotion or thought of any kind, Sarkis gave an audible consent; though he hardly knew that he had spoken. Slowly as it had begun, the waving motion of the feelers ceased. The continuous humming died; the pictures faded. Then, as before, there came the silvery flash of air-suspended machinery. Broad, oblique rods and concave meshes hovered between ceiling and floor, descended about the alien entities—and about Sarkis himself.

CHAPTER II

THE WORLD OF BELOW

DIMLY, between the glowing bars, he described the familiar furnishings of his room. An instant more, and the room vanished like a film of shadow wiped away to light. There was no sense of movement or of transit, but it seemed that a foreign sky had opened above, pouring down a deluge of crimson. Redness streamed upon him; it dripped over him in sullen or burning cascades, and filled his eyes with a fury as of boiling blood.

By degrees, he began to distinguish outlines and masses. The bars and meshes were still around him; his strange companions still beside him. They were weirdly altered, now, and they swam in the crimson flood like the goblin fish of some infernal sea. Involuntarily, Sarkis

shrank from them: they were terrifying, monstrous.

He saw that he was standing on a curiously tessellated floor that curved upward on all sides, like the bottom of a huge saucer. High, outward-sloping walls, windowless and roofless, towered all about. The mechanism that surrounded him was also topless, and he perceived that it was changing. Very slowly, like dying flames, the rods and meshes sank and disappeared in a circle of small sockets that were part of the floor.

A deep vermilion heaven domed the tower, pouring down the thick, heavy light; and the material of which the building was composed, whether stone, metal or some unheard-of element, flowed with hues of liquid ruby and dissolving cinnabar. Sarkis became aware that the air he breathed, though well supplied with oxygen, was uncomfortably thick and seemed to choke his lungs. Also, when he tried to move, he found his weight enormously increased, as if by the gravitation of a gigantic planet.

Where he was, or how he had come there, he could not imagine. He had nursed an artistic longing for the weird, the other-worldly; but he had never dreamed of this utter and delicious alienation from known things. Moreover, he had not foreseen the shock to human nerves that would ensue an actual transition into another sphere. His sensations of physical discomfort were soon supplemented by a sort of optic torture. The light troubled him; it stimulated his senses cruelly, and yet it stifled and oppressed him at the same time.

A multitude of beings similar to his companions began to enter the topless tower, floating gradually down from the sky or swimming in through low doors. They crowded about him, and he found himself moving towards one of the exits, with their feelers and streamers nuzzing gently at his limbs. He felt an unreasoning terror at their touch, like a child in the grip of nightmare shadows. Their loud humming awoke in his brain the thought of some hostile horde of abominably droning insects.

Passing through the doorway, he entered a sea of light in which he was unable to discern clearly the features of the landscape. Almost vertically over-

head, he saw the blinding blot of a vast sun. The throng of goblin people, increasing momentarily, bore him down a grassless, barren slope whose bottom was lost in the inundating crimson.

More and more he felt an inexpressible malaise, a frightful mixture of confusion, irritation and depression to which all his senses contributed. He tried to recall the circumstances of his departure from Earth, and to assure himself that there was some natural explanation of all that had happened. The beings whose invitation he had accepted were, he told himself, friendly and well-meaning, and he would suffer no harm. But such thoughts were powerless to calm his agitated nerves, now subject to the assault of innumerable vibratory forces which the human system had never been meant to sustain.

THE torture deepened. His journey down the slope, rendered doubly slow by the dragging gravitational pull and the leisurely drifting of his fantastic entourage, who seemed to obey another and more decelerated tempo of time than man, was literally a descent into hell. Every impression became a source of pain and terror, and he found a lurking evil in all that surrounded him.

At the bottom of the slope, a second roofless, bowl-shaped tower loomed from the murk, on the shore of a stagnant sea. To Sarkis, at that moment, it was like a shrine of alien diabolism, hateful and menacing; and he wanted to scream aloud with a nameless horror when the goblin creatures bore him towards it and urged him through its portals.

The interior of this tower, yawning to the red sky, was lined from floor to top with countless outlandish carvings. In the centre of the floor stood a curious couch, made from a pile of mattress-thick fabrics. Eyeing the couch with nervous dubiety, Sarkis became aware that the throng had melted away, as if its curiosity was appeased. A mere half-dozen of the beings remained; and since all were equally monstrous, he could not be sure if his original companions were among them.

They gathered round him with their hateful droning, pulling him towards the couch. He resisted, but the massed

streamers were unbelievably strong, and they tightened about him, clamorously repulsive as the tentacles of octopi. The couch was innocent enough, and no doubt the creatures were merely offering him a hospitality which, in their own way, they had tried to accommodate to human needs. But Sarkis felt the terror of a fever patient whose doctors and attendants seem like hellish torturers; his last remnant of control gave way, and he shrieked and fought wildly. His own voice assumed an uncanny volume in the thick air, returning upon him deafeningly, surrounding him with ventriloquistic clamours; and he seemed to lift a mountainous load as he struggled.

Very gently, but firmly, the creatures laid him on the couch. Fearing he knew not what, he still tried to resist them. Two of the beings proceeded to join their streamers across his recumbent body, interlacing the divided ends like fingers; and two others arranged their members in like fashion across his legs. Floating just above the floor, they held him securely to the couch, like doctors who have tied down a delirious patient. Lying helpless, he saw the remaining two creatures swim skyward and vanish beyond the tower's rim. After a while, he ceased his futile struggling; but his attendants still held him bound with their flat, clammy streamers.

Thenceforth he lived in an aching torment, whose duration was not to be measured by Earthly time. The red sky appeared to descend upon him, heavier and closer, and the enigmatic details of the sculptures on the tower walls perturbed him with sly suggestions of alien foulness and fear. He saw Satanic faces that leered or frowned obscenely, and faceless gargoyle things that seemed to palpitate with malignant life in the crimson.

The sky took on an awful, ardent glowing. With intolerable slowness, the huge sun, rising to its meridian, filled with lurid the cup that was formed by the tower's rim. The intricate carvings ran with redoubled light, and the stellar monsters and gargoyles dripped a venomous ruby that maddened the staring eyes of Sarkis, until he closed his lids against it, and still saw in his branded brain the corrosive, inexorably irritant colour.

Finally, a great blackness came upon him, a sluggish and leaden lethargy, through which he sank interminably, still pursued by floating bills of acid crimson.

HE AWOKE in a sort of stupefaction, drugged and exhausted, as if his nerves had been burned out by that cruel debauch of red. With nightmare effort, he opened his eyes to a heaven of funeral-violet. The red sun had been succeeded by a purple binary of equal magnitude, whose orb was now intersecting the topless tower with a mournfully glaring crescent.

Sarkis could not collect his shattered thoughts, but a shapeless fear, an awareness of something irretrievably wrong and hateful, rose in his mind. He was still held by the streamers of his four attendants; and moving his head, he saw that several others were floating patiently beside the couch. With their adroit members, more supple, and capacious than hands, they bore a multitude of strange articles. Seeing that he had awakened, they swam towards him, proffering smooth, elongated, fruit-like objects. One of them held to his lips a shallow bowl filled with a semi-violet liquor, which he was plainly expected to drink.

Utterly astir and unstrung, he shrank in renewed terror from these beings. Bathed in that lugubrious violet, their outer forms were cadaverous as dead things from another star. An infinite melancholia poured from the purple sun, cascaded from the sloping walls, and jetted from the monstrous carvings. The beginning of his attendants, who doubtless sought to reassure him, was heavy with a dike-like horror. Refusing the proffered food and drink, he closed his eyes and lay inert beneath the dismal sadness that had fallen upon him.

All that followed was as if part of this sadness, and not to be separated from its tinging phantasm. Sarkis was lifted from the couch by his attendants, who formed a sort of cradle with their streamers, in which they carried him from the tower and along some endless road. At intervals, he opened his eyes to ghastly-looking plants that swam and swayed in the violet air like sea-weed in an ocean-stream; and presently he knew that his bearers were descending a steep

incline, as if to some deeper circle of this dolorous inferno. Walls that might have been those of a slanted catacomb, lit with a bluish, deathly luminescence, stifled him with their closeness.

At length he found himself in a great chamber, whose furnishings, to his dazed eyes, bore the aspect of frightful instruments of torture. His alarm was increased when the fat-bodied creatures stretched him on a slightly hollowed slab of pale mineral, whose strings of machinery at sides and ends were reminiscent of some medieval rack. A heavy bear weighed down his faculties, arrested his breathing; and he did not resist.

One of his torturers was floating above him in the hell-blue light, while the others swam in a ring about the slab. The floating creature laid the frigid tips of its middle streamer on his mouth and nostrils, and he felt an odd shock from the contact. An icy coldness flowed across his face, into his brow and head; into his neck, his arms, his body. It seemed that a strange, benumbing force had been exerted by the creature.

The flowing coldness was followed by a loss of all sensation, and a singular detachment from the terror and malaise that had tormented him. Without alarm or speculation, he considered the beings about him, who were now removing his garments and applying to his body the sinister little disks and needle-studded plates that formed part of the slab's mechanical equipment. It was all meaningless to him; and in some fashion that he did not even try to understand, the whole scene took on an ever-growing dimness and remoteness, as if he were floating away from it—and from himself—into another dimension.

CHAPTER III

THE COSMIC THREAT

HIS return to awareness was like a new birth. Strangeness there was, such as an infant would find in its surroundings, but fear and pain were wholly gone. He found nothing monstrous or unnatural or menacing in the world

that was now revealed to his senses.

Later, when he had learned to communicate easily with the people of Mlok, they told him of the singular and radical operations which they had deemed it necessary to perform upon him: operations involving his nerves and sense-organs, so as to alleviate, by changing all his impressions and certain subconscious functions, the torment he had suffered from the images and vibratory rays of a world in which the human senses would not function properly. At first, they had not understood his sufferings, since they themselves, being far more adaptive than men, endured little discomfort in passing from one world to another. But, having diagnosed his condition, they had hastened to palliate it through the resources of a superhuman science.

Just what had been done to him, Sarkis could never wholly grasp, but the results of the operations admitted him to an entire new range of perceptions. His other-world hosts had wished to make him hear, see, feel and perceive in much the same manner as themselves. Perhaps the profoundest change was in his visual images. He saw new colours of superlative softness and beauty. The red daylight, which had almost maddened him, was now a clear and sandless hue which he somehow associated with emerald green; the light of the violet binary no longer depressed him, and its colour was remotely allied to pale amber.

His ideas of form had undergone a corresponding alteration. The bodies and members of the alien beings, which he had thought almost two-dimensional and had terrified him with their goblin grotesquery, presented many subtle planes and curves, together with a depth that argued the addition of at least one totally new dimension. The whole effect was aesthetically pleasing, with a fundamental symmetry such as he had previously discerned in well-shaped human bodies. The vegetation, scenery and architecture, too, no longer impressed him as abnormal or monstrous.

His sense of time had now become synchronised with the slow tempo of the heavy planet, and the speech and movement of the inhabitants had lost that former sense of undue prolongation. The thick air, and the weighty gravitation, had

also ceased to distort him. Moreover, he had acquired several new senses, one of which could only be described as a combination of hearing and touch. Many sound-images, especially those of high pitch, were perceived by his ears; the sensation was of a gently varied tapping. Another sense was that of audible colour: certain hues were always accompanied by an overtone of sound, often highly musical.

His intercourse with the people of Mlok was carried on through several mediums. After the operations, they could impress telepathic words and images upon his mind. Their other modes of communication, which involved for them less expenditure of energy than pure telepathy, were mastered more gradually by Sarkis. The reflex of thought-pictures, thrown on their bodies as on a screen, became intelligible to him; and the sound-vibration of their arabesque feelers, which served them in lieu of vocal cords, was now fully articulate, with its higher notes perceptible as a graduated tactile pressure.

He learned that his hosts, who called themselves the Mloki, after their planet, were an old and highly developed race, for whom the marvels of scientific modernism had become secondary to the delights of pure perception and reflection. Mlok, they told him, was the third planet of a binary solar system in a galaxy so remote, astronomically speaking, that its light had never reached the Earth. The manner in which they themselves had reached Earth, and had taken him to their own world, was strange indeed, and involved the use of an arcane force which, by projecting itself through the Fifth Dimension, could exist simultaneously in opposite corners of the universe. The apparatus of silvery bars and meshes which had descended upon Sarkis was composed of this force; how it was controlled and manipulated, he never quite understood, apart from the fact that it was closely obedient to a certain nervous power possessed by the Mloki.

These beings had often visited the Earth, as well as many other alien planets, through curiosity; and in spite of their divergent sense-development, they had acquired a surprising knowledge of Terrene conditions. Two of them, whose names were Nlaa and Nkuu, had found Sarkis on Spanish Mountain, and had per-

ceived telepathically his dissatisfaction with mundane life. Being sympathetic in their way, and also curious concerning the result of such an experiment, they had invited him to accompany them on their return to Mlok.

THE real events of Sarkis' life among the Mloki were his new and wonderful sensations. The outward happenings were all very simple, for the existence of this people, apart from their excursions to remote worlds, was almost wholly contemplative.

For his food and drink, they supplied him with many fruits and vegetable juices. The Mloki themselves drew their nourishment directly from the air and light; and their tapless towers were designed to collect and focus all the solar rays, the absorption of which was to them a rare, epicurean pleasure. To a limited extent, the alteration of Sarkis' nerves had given him a similar faculty, but he still depended mainly on grosser foods.

One very remarkable feature of the sensory change in Sarkis was the vagueness which attended his impressions of his own body. He seemed to possess a dream-like immateriality, and to drift rather than walk in his movement from place to place.

He spent much of his time in converse with certain of the Mloki, especially Nlan and Nluu, who took a tutelary interest in their protégé, and never wearied of imparting to him their immensely recondite and various knowledge. He acquired undreamed-of conceptions regarding time, space, life, matter and energy, and was also instructed in novel aesthetics and in highly complicated arts which made painting appear a silly and barbarous pastime.

How long he remained in Mlok, he never knew. His instructors, a long-lived people to whom centuries were no more than years, gave little importance to the formal measurement of time. But many of the long, double days and brief, irregular nights had gone by, before a homesickness for the lost Earth began to torment him. Amid all the beguilements and novelties of his existence, beneath his altered senses, a nostalgia rose in his brain, which was still, at bottom, the brain of an Earthman.

The feeling came upon him by degrees. His memories of the world he had for-

merly detested, and from which he had longed to escape, took on a haunting charm and poignancy, and were touched with an enchantment such as belongs to early childhood. He recoiled from the sensory splendour of the world about him, and yearned for the simple scenes and faces of the human sphere.

The Mloki, well aware of the growth of this feeling, tried to distract him with new impressions, and took him on a tour of their planet. In this tour, they employed a vessel which swam through the thick air like a submarine in some Tellurian ocean. Nlan and Nluu accompanied him, glibly, and eager to point out the marvels of each latitude. The effect, however, was merely to aggravate his nostalgia. Peering down on the domelike Karmaks and Babylons of this ultracosmic world, he thought of the Earth-cities with a craving which, in view of his former aversion for the works of man, he would never have believed possible. Drifting among prodigious mountains, where mundane peaks would have been lost like boulders, he recalled the Sierras with a sick yearning that moved him almost to tears.

AFTER rounding the equator of Mlok, and visiting the iceless poles, the expedition returned to its starting-point, which lay in the tropic realms. Sarkis, now desperately ill and languishing, implored Nlan and Nluu to send him back to his own world, by means of the occult force-projector. They tried to dissuade him, saying that his homesickness was merely a brain-wrought illusion that would wear off in time, then, in order to relieve him permanently and speedily from his suffering, they proposed a certain treatment of his brain-cells. By the injection of a rare vegetable serum, they could alter his very memories and mental reactions, and these as well as his sense-impressions, would then approximate those of the Mloki.

Sarkis, though he shrank in a way from the proposed mental transformation, which would have removed him utterly and for ever beyond humanity, might well have consented. But certain untoward happenings, wholly unforeseen, were to bring about another eventuation than this.

The planetary system to which Mlok

belonged was on the very extreme of its native island-universe. In the short inter-solar night, this universe could be seen as a nebulous star-cloud, filling half the heavens; but the other half was dark and rayless as the Coal Sack familiar to Terrene astronomers. It seemed that there were no living stars in the subtle gulf, unless at a distance that had not yet permeated their rays to reach the observatories of Mlok. Nevertheless, there came from this void the first invasion that had ever threatened the security of the two-urned planet.

The first warning of this invasion was a dark cloud, a thing hitherto unknown in Mlok, whose humid element was constant in the thick seas and heavy air, without evaporation or precipitation. The cloud, which had the form of a trapezium, drew down and widened rapidly above the southern zones, doming the sky with intense ebou. It broke on the lands beneath in a rain of black, liquid globules, which acted like a mordant chemical. Flesh, stone, vegetation, everything that was touched by the rain, dissolved instantly, forming tarry pools and rills that soon merged in an ever-spreading sea.

The news of this catastrophe became known immediately all over the planet. The corrosive sea was watched from air-vessels and every effort was made to curb its inroads. Dynes of atomic energy were built to enclose it, and belts of elemental fire were centred upon the pollution, to burn it away. But all such measures were in vain. The sea, like a liquid cancer, ate steadily into the huge planet.

Some of the black fluid was obtained by Mloki who sacrificed their own lives in submitting it to analysis. Even as the element began its ravages upon their bodies, they announced their findings as to its nature. The globules that had fallen from space, they thought, were protoplasmic organisms of a type hitherto unknown, which had the power of liquefying all other forms of matter in what was seemingly an illimitable process of assimilation. This process had formed the eroding sea.

Another rain of globules was soon reported, this time in the northern hemisphere. A third precipitation, following swiftly, made certain the eventual doom of Mlok. The people could only flee from

the dissolving shores of the three oceans, which were widening in ravenous circles, and would sooner or later unite and surround the planet. It became known, also, that the other worlds of the system, which were not peopled by intelligent beings, had been attacked by the lethal organisms.

CHAPTER IV

THE RETURN OF SARKIS

THE Mloki, a philosophic race, long given to equable meditation on cosmic change and death, were resigned to the coming annihilation. Though they could have fled to alien worlds by means of their space-projection, they preferred to perish with their planet. Nlan and Nluu, however, now became anxious for the return of Lenued Sarkis to his own sphere. It was not just or proper, they argued, that he should share the doom of an ultra-Terrene people. They had promptly abandoned the idea of subjecting him to further medical treatment, and could only urge his immediate departure.

In a state of oddly bewildered emotions, he was taken by his two guardians to the tower through which he had entered Mlok. From the hill on which this tower stood, he could discern on the far horizon the black arc of the encroaching sea of dissolution. Enjoined by his preceptors, he took his place amid the circle of foot-sockets that formed the generators of the transporting mechanism. With much regret and sadness, he said farewell to Nlan and Nluu, after vainly pressing them to accompany him.

Since, as they told him, they could determine by means of their thought-images the very spot in which he was to land, he had expressed a desire to return to Earth via his studio in San Francisco. Moreover, since travel in time was no less feasible than space-transit, his mundane reappearance would occur on the morning that had followed his departure. Slowly, and having now a different form and hue for his altered eyes, the bars and meshes sprang from the tower floor and surrounded Sarkis. All at once, the air darkened strangely. He turned again towards Nlan and Nluu for a parting glimpse—and

found that they, as well as the tower, had vanished. The transition had already taken place.

The pseudo-metallic rods and meshes began to dissolve about him, and he looked for the familiar outlines and furnishings of his studio. A paralytic assailed him, and then a hideously growing doubt. Surely Nlax and Nluu had made a mistake, or else the projecting power had failed to return him to his chosen bourne. Seemingly, he had been landed in a totally unknown sphere or dimension.

Around him, in a sudden light, he saw the looming of dark, chaotic masses, whose very contours were touched with nightmare menace. Surely this place was not his studio; these craggy-angled cliffs that closed him in were not walls, but the sides of some infernal pit! The dome above, with its dolorously distorted planes, pouring down a bellish glare, was not the skylighted roof that he recalled. The bulging horrors that rose before him along the bottom of the pit, with obscene forms and corrupt hues, were surely not his couch, table and chairs.

He took a single step, and was alarmed by the horrible lightness which he felt. As if by some miscalculation of distance, the step carried him against one of the looming objects; and he ran his hands over it, to find that the thing, whatever it might be, was clammy repulsive to the touch as well as repugnant to sight. Something about it, however, on close inspection, was remotely familiar. The thing was like an overswollen, geometric travesty of an arm-chair!

SARKIS felt a nervous perturbation, a vague and all-surrounding terror, comparable with that of his first impressions in Mlok. He realised that Nlax and Nluu had kept their word, and had returned him to his studio, but the realisation only increased his bewilderment. Because of the profound sensory changes to which he had been subjected by the Mlok, his perceptions of form, light, colour and perspective were no longer those of an Earth-man. Therefore, the well-remembered room and its furnishings were wholly monstrous to him.

Somehow, in his nostalgia, and the haste and flurry of his departure, he had failed

to foresee the inevitability of this change of aspect in all earthly things. A hideous vertigo swept upon him, with the full understanding of his predicament. He was virtually in the position of a madman who knows well his own madness, but is utterly without power to control it. Whether or not his new mode of cognition was closer to ultimate reality than the former human mode, he could not know. It mattered little, in the overwhelming sense of estrangement, amid which he sought desperately to recover the least hint or vestige of the world that he remembered.

With the doubtful groping of one who seeks an exit from some formidable maze, he searched for the door, which he had left unlocked on the evening when he accepted the invitation of Nlax and Nluu. His very sense of direction, he found, had become inverted: the relative nearness and proportion of objects baffled him. But at last, after many stumblings and collisions with the misshapen furniture, he found an insanely faceted projection amid the perverted planes of the wall. This, he somehow determined, was the door-knob.

After repeated effort, he opened the door, which seemed to be of unnatural thickness, with convex distortions. Beyond, he saw a yawning cavern with lugubrious arches, which he knew to be the hall of the apartment house in which he lived.

His progress along the hall, and down the two flights of stairs to the street-level, was like a pilgrimage in some ever-deepening nightmare. The time was early morning, and he had met no one. But apart from the maddening visual distortion of everything about him, he was assailed, as he went on, by a multitude of other sense-impressions that confirmed and increased his neural torture.

He heard the noises of the awakening city set to an alien tempo of delirious speed and fury: a hurtling of cruel clangours, whose higher notes beat upon him like a pounding of hammers, a volleying of pebbles. The ceaseless impingement stunned him more and more; it seemed that the thronging strokes would batter in his very brain.

HE EMERGED at length on what he knew to be the city street; a broad avenue that ran towards the

ferry building. The early traffic had begun and, to Sarkis, the passing cars and pedestrians seemed to whirl with lightning speed, like the souls of the damned in some rather chasm of an insane hell. For him, the morning sunlight was a lurid, baleful gloom that flowed in forked rays from a demoniac eye that brooded above the chasm.

The buildings, with pestilent hues and outlines, were full of the terror of delirium, the abomination of ill dreams. The people were ghastly creatures whose headlong movement barely permitted him to form a clear impression of their bulging eyes, their bloated faces and bodies. They terrified him, even as the people of Mlok beneath the maddening vermillion sun.

The air was thin and bodiless to him, and he suffered a peculiar discomfort from the lessened pressure and gravity, which added to his feeling of hopeless alienation. He seemed to move like a bewildered phantom through the dismal Hades to which he had been committed. He heard the voices of the monsters who went flying past; voices that partook of the same giddy acceleration as their movements, so that the words were indistinguishable. It was like the sound of some vocal record, played too fast on a gramophone.

Sarkis groped his way along the pavement, searching for some familiar landmark in the alien-angled masses of the buildings. Sometimes he thought that he was about to discover a remembered hotel or shop-front—and then, a moment later, the broken similitude was lost in a new bizarre. He came to an open space, which he had known as a small park, with well-kept trees and shrubbery amid the greening grass. He had been fond of the place, and its memory had often haunted him in his cosmic homesickness. Now, stumbling upon it in that city of delirium,

he sought vainly to retrieve the longed-for charm and loveliness.

The trees and shrubs were like towering fungi, loathsome and unclean, and the grass was a vermin-grey foulness from which he turned in sick revulsion. Astray in that labyrinth of fear, and virtually out of his senses, he fled at random, and tried to cross an arterial road where cars were hurtling by at the apparent speed of projectiles. Here, with no warning that his eyes or ears could perceive, something struck him down like a sudden bolt, and he slid into merciful oblivion.

He awoke, an hour later, in the hospital to which he had been taken. The injuries which he had sustained, from being knocked down by the slowly-driven car before which he had thrust himself as if deaf and blind, were not serious, but his general condition puzzled the doctors. When, with reviving consciousness, he began to scream horribly, and to shrivel away as if in mortal terror from his attendants, they were inclined to diagnose the case as delirium tremens. His nerves were obviously in a bad way; though, curiously enough, the doctors failed to detect the presence of alcohol or any known drug to support their diagnosis.

Sarkis failed to respond to the powerful sedatives which they administered. His sufferings, which seemed to take the form of terrific hallucinations, were prolonged and progressive. One of the medicals noted a queer deformation of his eyeballs, and there was much speculation regarding the singular, long-drawn sobs of his screams and writhings. However, though baffling, his case was readily enough dismissed by the doctors when, a week later, he persisted in dying. It was merely one more of those unsolved enigmas that sometimes occur even in the best-regulated of professions.

Things to come . . .

EXILES OF ASPERUS

by John Beynon